

Email Etiquette & Style

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The two big elements, which should determine all your choices:

Audience: who will read this email?

Purpose: what do you want to happen after the recipient reads the email?

Audience

Consider the recipient's relationship to you in power hierarchy
for buddies-peers, informal, text-msg, emoticons, lack of punc/grammar is fine
for employees/employers, those techniques are not okay
what relationship are you trying to establish with the recipient of the email?

What image do you create of yourself with a badly written email?

careless with details?

self-centered?

clueless about conventions and expectations?

[slide 9: the student distraught over final exam grade]

* Lose the humorous email address when you use your non-USF email address for business or as a contact for potential employers: "mistercreamy" or "hot gurrrrrl" probably isn't the professional image you are trying to create

Respecting the recipient's time

*use a clear, specific, and defining subject line

bad: "meeting"

better: "picnic committee meeting"

best: "picnic committee meeting agenda for August"

1. the reader can decide if this requires immediate attention

2. the reader can find this particular email weeks later, not having to open several emails to find a particular one

*keep email brief, to the point

*use the ! urgency mark very sparingly

*don't cc anyone who doesn't need to receive the email

*if you have large attachments that may take a long time to download, send them individually and alert the recipient to their size

*in a series of emails back and forth, don't delete the whole thread when you reply; leave at least the email to which you are responding. With hundreds of emails crossing to, the recipient may have forgotten what the question was. But once the series has moved past an earlier point on to a new one, you can trim the thread accordingly

Social graces: Just who are you, anyhow?

Open with a greeting by name, and use the form preferred by the recipient

--for a faculty member, Professor or Dr unless she has invited you to call her by first name

--for a client, use honorifics (Mr., Mrs., Ms.)--though this one is tricky

a) if you can't tell the gender (use first and last name without the honorific)

b) if you don't know if she prefers Ms. or Mrs. (no good rule here)

[there are style guides for addressing a couple--this part really gets complicated]

Even if you're using a template for clients, personalize the opening

Identify yourself at the opening of the email if it's to someone who doesn't know you well

--for a faculty member, tell her which class you're in or, if you were a student in an earlier semester, tell her which semester and which class

--for an infrequent business contact, remind her of the context in which she knows you

Just as in a business letter, use a polite closing and include your name, along with other contact information

Some professionals find the receipt-confirmation function obnoxious; some don't. Probably best not to leave that turned on for all emails you send.

Acknowledge email as soon as you can. If you cannot give the writer the information he needs immediately, let him know when you will be able to supply it

Style (also a social grace)

Your word choices imply respect or lack of respect for the recipient

As in any business letter, use conventional grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and Spelling

Emoticons are appropriate only for very informal emails (between friends, for instance)
[slide 13: email gone wrong #2: style]

Keep sentences fairly short--it's more difficult to read long sentences online than on hard-copy pages

Organization and Formatting

Use paragraphing to separate ideas for three psychological reasons:

- white space lets the reader breathe
- white spaces between paragraphs create visual cues that reveal how many information chunks there are
- each paragraph has a beginning and ending, and those are what readers pay attention to most

Unless you know that the recipient has a computer which displays graphics, colors, and unusual fonts in email, limit their use

If this is a long email, open with a paragraph hitting the main ideas, then explain them further in rest of email

- remember that readers may not realize there's more to the email than appears on the Screen
- as with any business letter, specify any action you expect the reader to take and by when

Use bold headings and brief sections to visually help reader notice important information

[slides 22 and 23-- with and without headings]

Pitfalls

Email is forever and potentially a lot more public than we realize

- especially at a state-agency or institution, email may be accessible by public
- email has a way of being seen by others than the recipient
- don't put in writing things you may regret later
- proofread before you send, and cool down before you send something angry or rude